

Eternal Convictions

For six weeks, we've rehearsed Biblical CORE CONVICTIONS: *truths imbedded by the Holy Spirit in the heart of a disciple of Jesus Christ, by which she/he understands what is actually true, uncompromisingly important, and lives accordingly.* Our conviction about

THE TRUE GOD – Uncreated, Great and Good, a Triune being of co-equal persons

THE BIBLE – A library of God-breathed books, fully authoritative over every realm of human knowledge

OUR HUMAN CONDITION – created wondrously in God's Image, fallen desperately in sin

JESUS CHRIST – Fully God, fully man, the provided Lamb of God, sacrificed for our redemption, our substitute to be believed in

THE HOLY SPIRIT – The Person of God commissioned to empower the renovation and witness of Jesus' disciples, **THE CHURCH**

ABOUT CHRISTIAN LIVING in light of **CHRIST'S IMMINENT RETURN** – obedience is the best way to wait for His return

These are CORE CONVICTIONS, if you take the Bible seriously. And, there's one more:

Response and Eternal Destiny

We believe that **God commands everyone** everywhere **to believe the gospel** by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ.

We believe that **God will raise the dead** bodily and **judge the world**, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen. (Article 10)

Wow! Is this one of your CORE CONVICTIONS?

Think about it for a moment. And you may answer, "Yes, it is." But if so, please understand, this is not your neighbors' conviction, if you take the polls seriously. What do we know about our neighbors? According to Aaron Earls (citing both Pew Research and Lifeway Research studies)

- 66% of those who call themselves Christians in America say **that many religions can lead to eternal life with God**...[this view] especially among mainline Protestants (80%) and Roman Catholics (79%).
- If your neighbor is Hindu, she/he would agree with that (96%).
- If your neighbor is Buddhist, she/he would agree with that (83%)
- If your neighbor is Muslim, she/she would likely agree with that (65%)

And to that

- 64% of Americans say that God accepts the worship of all religions.
- 60% of Americans say that heaven is a place where all people will be ultimately reunited with their loved ones, and ...
- at least 52% of Americans say they contribute to earning a place in heaven by the good deeds they do.

In other words, when it comes to RESPONSE and ETERNAL DESTINY, it is most likely that your

neighbor believes...and perhaps you as well...that it really doesn't matter WHAT you believe because "WE ARE ALL GOING TO GET THERE EVENTUALLY."

Might that be what you believe? And, Is that widely held viewpoint actually true? Should not we ask: Is that what this God-breathed-out library-of-revelation actually teaches?

Our 10th CORE CONVICTION declares something not shared by most Americans:

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What is the essential truth arising from this CORE CONVICTION? Simply this:

**Life's most important choice bears
forever's most important consequences.**
therefore

Listen carefully. Believe humbly. Prepare eternally.

So what's "life's most important choice"? The choice that "bears forever's most important consequences?" According to the Bible, it is the choice to believe the gospel, or not believe it. Jesus Himself put it this way:

John 3:18 Whoever **believes** in him (i.e., the Son of God) is not condemned, but whoever does not **believe** is condemned already, because he has not **believed** in the name of the only Son of God

John the Baptizer, Jesus' forerunner, declared the same truth

John 3:36 Whoever **believes** in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son (by believing) shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

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forever's most important consequences.**
therefore

Listen carefully. Repent humbly. Prepare eternally.

For just a few moments, let's camp out on those last 3 statements. First, we all must

LISTEN CAREFULLY – in two ways

Listen to the COMMAND of the ONE TRUE GOD

What does God have the right to command from people? He has the right to command that we

acknowledge and believe there is but ONE true God (Romans 1:18-23)

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

There may be no more important set of verses to understand what transpires in the world religiously. There are thousands of religions, and thousands of gods worshipped in those religions. So how does the one true God size them up? They ALL are the product of rejecting the truth in unthankful, futile thinking and foolish, darkened hearts.

Repeatedly through history, the true God has said, [Isaiah 45:22] ***“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.”*** The one, true God has the right to command our listening attention. And, #2 we must

Listen to the GOSPEL of the ONE TRUE GOD

This, of course, was the stunning declaration of Paul when he spoke to the philosophers in ancient Athens. Like so many today, these eminent philosophers were convinced that there were all kinds of gods, and speculative guesses were about as good as anyone could do. But Paul’s word pierced the air like a single trumpet blast:

Acts 17:30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people **everywhere to repent**, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him (i.e., Jesus) from the dead.” ⁱⁱ

Isaiah 46:12-13 “Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness:
I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay;

Peter in Acts 4:11-12 This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. **And there is salvation in no one else**, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

***Life’s most important choice bears
forever’s most important consequences.
therefore Listen carefully.***

If the world would listen, what would they hear from the one true God.

For fifty-seven years, Steve Henning of Huntley, Illinois, could not hear music, laughter, or human speech. Even though he lived a full life, he still longed to hear the voices of those he loved.

In the winter of 2001, he learned of a surgical procedure that would allow sound waves to bypass the nonfunctioning part of his ear and travel directly to the auditory nerve.

On January 30, he was operated on. Because the implanted device could not be activated until the swelling in the ear decreased, doctors and Steve didn't know for six weeks if the operation was successful.

Finally, the six weeks was up. As Steve waited nervously, the audiologist programmed the cochlear implant. Then he invited Steve's wife to say something. Pat Henning leaned toward her husband and gently said, "I love you."

Able to hear for the first time in six decades, Steve's face broke into a smile. The first words he heard were of love.ⁱⁱⁱ

Why do I share that story? If the world would listen, the first words they would hear are these:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only (begotten) Son, that whoever believes in(to) Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved in Him (John 3:16-17).

Listen carefully to the command to believe Gospel of love of the one true God. Then...

REPENT HUMBLY

Response and Eternal Destiny

We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel **by turning to Him in repentance and receiving** the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does that mean? to turn "to Him in *repentance*"? What does God expect when we listen carefully to His good news?

There are many illustrations of repentance in the Bible.

- when **King David** was confronted by the prophet Nathan about his adultery with another man's wife, and his murder of that man, and his taking of the man's wife to be his own, David repented. He changed his mind which had been thinking he was above God's law and immune to God's judgment. He repented by acknowledging his sin and weeping before God and begging for forgiveness
- when the **King** and the **populace** of the city of **Nineveh** heard through Jonah that the true God was giving them 40 days before catastrophic judgment fell, they repented. They changed their minds about the acceptability of their violent, sinful behavior, dressed in sackcloth, sat in ashes together begging Jonah's God for forgiveness
- when the **rebellious son** who had squandered all that his father had given him woke up in a pig pen eating what the pigs were given to eat, he finally changed his thinking about the acceptability of living for himself and his flesh, and came back on his knees to his father begging to be forgiven
- when **Saul**, busy arresting Christians, beating them and throwing them in jail, met the Lord on the road to Damascus, he was humbled in blindness and changed his mind about Jesus being God's messiah, realizing that he had been the worst of sinners and needed God's grace

Repentance – easy to understand, much more difficult (perhaps) to do. μετάνοια is a simple,

common Greek term meaning "to reverse one's thinking." To change one's mind. It means admitting

what I was believing has to change. It means reversing what I was trusting in, setting aside my self-assured outlook and my life doesn't require any Divine correcting. Repentance requires the humility of genuinely saying to God's Holy Spirit, "I was wrong in not listening carefully; I've been sinful in not believing in Your Son. Today, right now, I receive Him by faith." ^{iv} A "turning to God" in repentance.

A Christian therapist listened to a man having trouble controlling his anger. His outbursts were affecting his work, his family, his life. So he finally decided to get some help. The counselor asked, "What would your life look like if you got rid of your anger?" He was quiet a long time. Finally he said, "But if I get rid of my anger, what will I have left?"^v

Perhaps that is what is keeping you from repentance. For so long, you've cherished your independence from God, your pride in bending your need to Christ. Perhaps in your heart of hearts you think, "Wow...if I leave behind what I have been thinking...what will I have left?"

Sin is the best news there is, because with sin, there's a way out. You can't repent of confusion or psychological flaws inflicted by your parents — you're stuck with them. But you can repent of sin. Sin and repentance are the only grounds for hope and joy, the grounds for reconciled, joyful relationships.

— John Alexander, *The Other Side*, quoted in *Leadership* (Summer 2000)

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therefore Listen carefully. Repent humbly.**

Third...

PREPARE ETERNALLY

We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.

Yep, I get it. To read this, and to believe this as a **core conviction** is very challenging. And, as we noted at the beginning (this morning), most Americans do not buy in. Most believe that somehow, someday, ALL OF US are going to join our family and friends in God's heaven.

But that is not what Jesus believed, and that is not what Jesus taught. Listen to Scripture:

Daniel 12:1-2 And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Matthew 7:13-14 "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

John 5:24-29 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the

dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

² Thessalonians 1:7-10 when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when He comes on that day to be glorified in His saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

In his explanation of this core conviction – on the outcome of the resurrection of the dead –

Greg Strand simply summarizes what the Word of God teaches.

Our [biblical] conviction is that there is a coming divine judgment (evaluation) which will finalize the eternal destiny of each human being. Contrary to the opinion of some, the gospel is not simply a self-help strategy for finding peace and happiness in this life.

*The Bible presents the gospel as a matter of eternal significance. In fact, it is a matter of heaven and hell, for our eternal destiny **hinges on our response** to Jesus Christ (cf. John 3:36; 5:24; 8:24).^{vi}*

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A Sunday school teacher wanted to explain to the six-year-olds in his class what someone had to do to go to heaven. To find out what kids believed about the subject, he asked a few questions. “If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me to heaven?” he asked.

“No!” the children answered. The teacher was encouraged.

“If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me to heaven?”

Again the answer was, “No!”

“If I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my wife, would that get me into heaven?”

Again they all shouted, “No!”

“Well then, how can I get to heaven?”

A boy in the back row stood up and shouted, “You gotta be dead!”

— Andy Stanley, *How Good Is Good Enough?* (Multnomah, 2003)

Anne Graham Lotz--daughter of evangelist Billy Graham and his wife, Ruth--was asked if those who died in the explosions of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, but had not confessed Christ as Savior would go to heaven. She replied:

In my little book *Heaven: My Father's House*, I tell about people who want to visit my father's home in western North Carolina. They drive up the long drive and come to the gate. They knock on the gate and say, “Billy Graham, let us in. We've read your books, we've watched you on TV, we've written to you, and we want to come to your house.”

And my father says, “Depart from me, I don't know you. You're not a member of my family, and you've not made any arrangements to come.”

But when I drive up that same driveway and knock on the gate, I say, “Daddy, this is Anne,

and I've come home." The gate is thrown right open, and I go inside, because I'm the father's child.

Because heaven is God's house, he has the right to decide who comes in and who stays out. He says he will welcome anyone inside his home, but they have to be born again into his family through faith in Jesus Christ.

That gives us a wonderful hope that when the time comes — whether death comes as a thief in the night, as it did for those in the [World Trade Center] towers, or as an angel of mercy after a long illness — we can be assured that at the end of the journey, we'll step right into our Father's arms. We'll be welcomed there because we are our Father's children.

— Anne Graham Lotz, "Finding Meaning in September 11," CNN.com (December 11, 2006)

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ⁱ Greg Strand, EFCA. *Evangelical Convictions* (Kindle Locations 5585-5588). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition. "The New Testament presents the gospel not simply as a helpful suggestion to implement or even an invitation to accept, but as a **command to obey** (cf. 2 Thess. 1:8; Rom. 10:16; also Acts 5:32; 6:7; 17:30; Rom. 6:17; Heb. 5:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:17). The proper response to this command, however, is faith, the sole means of receiving God's saving grace (cf. John 6:29)"

ⁱⁱ Greg Stand, FCA. *Evangelical Convictions* (Kindle Locations 5590-5592). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition. "In reference to the Athenians' altar to "an unknown god," the Apostle Paul declared to the pagan philosophers of Mars Hill, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). The call of the gospel message is not limited to Jews or even to God-fearing Gentiles. It is universal in its scope, addressing everyone, everywhere."

ⁱⁱⁱ Greg Asimakoupoulos, "Hearing God's Word of Love," PreachingToday.com

^{iv} Greg Strand, EFCA. *Evangelical Convictions* (Kindle Locations 5612-5625). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition. "Faith has content; it is faith in something. To believe, in a biblical sense, we must first understand the content of the gospel. This first aspect of faith is what the Reformers called in Latin **notitia**. It consists of the notions, the ideas, the conceptions that are to be believed. The early Christians sometimes called this "the faith"—the doctrines taught in the Bible about God and man and the revelation of God in a man, Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of the content of our faith in a passage like 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (cf. also, e.g., 1 Tim. 3:9; 4:6; Titus 1:13). In this sense, faith involves knowledge—we must know who Christ is and what he has done before we can believe in him. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

"A second aspect of biblical faith is what the Reformers called **assensus**. We must not only understand the message, we must assent to it. To believe, in a biblical sense, we must come to a conviction about the truth of the gospel. Is there truly a God who created the universe? Did he really enter into our world in Jesus Christ? Did Jesus actually die on a cross for our sins? And did he rise from the dead? Is it true? Biblical faith involves an understanding of certain content—a body of claims about reality; and it involves a conviction about the truth of those claims.

"But these two dimensions of faith are not enough. Understanding the message is crucial, believing that it is true is essential, but without a third dimension that faith is still deficient. James can speak of such faith as merely the faith of demons (cf. James 2:19). Faith, to be real, must pass from understanding, and even conviction, to personal commitment. This third dimension of faith is what the Reformers called **fiducia**. Christian faith requires a personal element of trust, reliance and allegiance."

^v Kevin Miller, Wheaton, Illinois, in *1001 Illustrations that Connect*

^{vi} EFCA. *Evangelical Convictions* (Kindle Locations 5684-5686). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.